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ABSTRACT

The author contends that a teacher training program for teachers of gifted should present the historical and philosophical antecedents of education for the gifted and generate within the trainee an awareness of his/her philosophy. Listings of teacher qualifications are given, and various components of a teacher training model (including a plan for screening prospective trainees) are discussed. (SBH)

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A Description of a Teacher Training Program for the Education of the Gifted

(A paper presented at the Fifth Annual Conference on Gifted and Talented Education, 20 October 1977, at Ames, Iowa)

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From Whence Have We Come?

To say that the education of the gifted is nothing new is comparable to discovering the obvious. A technique designed to identify the gifted, at one point in time, incorporated memory and deception. No, this is not an avant-garde technique as you will discover upon its perusal.

> We must watch them from their youth upwards and make them perform actions in which they are most likely to forget or to be deceived, and he who remembers and is not deceived is to be selected, and he who fails in the trial is to be rejected. THAT WILL BE THE WAY.
>
> Plato

Among many messages which can be extracted from Plato's quote, is the realization that education of the gifted is indeed nothing new. Upon historical reflection, one might conclude that the majority of education available in earlier periods was primarily, if not exclusively, for the gifted.

The educational antecedents in our own country seem to exemplify a primary concern for the gifted without a total disregard for the masses. With rare exceptions greater educational pursuits, of an academic nature, were limited to the gifted of position. R. Freeman Butts provides some insights into this aspect of history.

> Seldom was it argued in colonial times that the aim of education was to empower every individual to make the most of himself as a person.---

> Children of poor, lower-class parents had no education at all or were bound out as apprentices to learn a trade. Children of upper-class parents (public officers, clergymen, wealthy landowners) were expected to have an education appropriate to their station in life. (Butts, 1960 pg 9).

Butts does suggest that the New England colonies broke this carry-over pattern from Europe, to a certain extent, by seeking functional literacy for the masses. In the final analysis it can be seen that real change was slow in emerging.

Such notable figures in American history, as Thomas Jefferson, Noah Webster, and Benjamin Rush agreed in theory that elementary instruction of all classes of American society was more important than higher education for an elite. In practice, however, Jefferson, in his bill of 1779 titled "For the More General Diffusion of Knowledge" devised a scheme for the selection and education of a natural aristocracy which would supplement, but not supplant the aristocracy of birth and wealth. He proposed a rigorous means to select these natural aristocrats for scholarship. Jefferson referred to this process as, "raking a few geniuses from rubbish." (Tyack, 1967 pg 89). Jefferson's legislative prose may have been one of the earlier expressions of written concern for the identification of the gifted other than by birth or wealth alone.

Among the many who directly or indirectly began to seriously challenge the notion of education primarily for the well-born and wealthy, were Andrew Jackson and Horace Mann. The Jackson era was heavily steeped in a spirit of egalitarianism. Horace Mann, of that era, possessed some of the traits of a successful, modern day, mediator by being able to found the concept of public education. He was able to win support for this tax based, desecularized notion of education by

waxing eloquent with both the upper and lower classes of society. He did so by attacking the weakest link in the defenses of each class. To the wealthy he played upon their fear of a radically leveling social revolution. To the lower class he played upon the fear of lost income. His arguments to the wealthy were thus:

> ---investment in a common school might have class survival value, for in such a school any thoughts of revolutionary action and radical social leveling could and would be educated out of the young in favor of change through the democrative processes.(Best and Sidwell, 1967 pg 106).

He developed a line of reasoning designed to diminish the feeling that income would be lost by virtue of a child going to school rather than to work. He proceeded thusly in his appeal to the lower classes:

> ---with schooling, the potential income would be magnified and in the long run would far outweigh the limited financial contribution that the uneducated child could make (Best and Sidwell, 1967 pg 106).

One conclusion to emerge from all this is that the egalitarianism of Jackson and the public school of Mann significantly altered education in the United States and made it unique in the world. The result was the notion of education for all. Once this was accomplished, to educate the gifted began to suggest some sort of caste system within education that is quite a repugnant concept to some elements.

This dilemma still exists for some professionals today. Some people, educators among them, equate public education and education for the gifted as mutually exclusive sets. The purpose of this paper is not to attempt to sove this problem. It seems appropriate for inclusion in a discussion of teacher training models for teachers of the gifted, because it raises the issue of the the trainee having to come to grips with his/her beliefs. This really raises the question of philosophy.

In this respect, a teacher training program would do well to:

1. Present the historical and philosophical antecedents of education for the gifted.
2. Generate within the trainee an awareness of his/her philosophy.

Several purposes are served. (1) Pragmatically a teacher of the gifted may be faced with responsibilities for program development. Programs for the gifted, as should all programs, are held together with a philosophy. The ability to deal with philosophical issues should be a part of training and should not be left to chance. (2) The trainee may discover that he/she cannot philosophically embrace the concept of education for the gifted. The liberal, egalitarian may eventually have philosophical problems with the aspects of competition, and partial segregation which may become a part of some educational programming for the gifted. Realizing that philosophical and affective change is slow and difficult in adults, such a discovery early in a program, might suggest that this is not an appropriate area to be pursued by the trainee.

Who Shall Become?

The preceding section suggests some sort of philosophical screening device for teachers of the gifted. This very assumption, at least as perceived by this author, further suggests that all teachers should not necessarily become teachers of the gifted. Crow and Crow felt that teachers of the gifted need to be:

1. Sufficiently secure so they are not threatened by superior ability, performance, and creativity.
2. Flexible and creative persons.
3. Concerned with individual differences.
4. Resourceful.
5. Motivated to teach the gifted.
6. Experienced. (Crow and Crow, 1963)

This does not seem to be an unrealistic set of characteristics.

William Bishop reported upon characteristics of teachers of the gifted as perceived by their students. His research analyzed selected characteristics of high school teachers who were identified as successful by intellectually gifted, high achieving students. The purpose was to determine what differentiated these teachers from teachers not so identified. The findings suggest that successful teachers of the gifted are:

1. Mature and experienced.
2. Mentally superior themselves.
3. Pursuers of avocational interests which are intellectual in nature.
4. Characterized by high achievement needs - they attempt to do their best and to succeed.
5. Those who entered teaching because of a desire for intellectual growth.
6. Possessive of more favorable attitudes toward students.
7. More student-centered in their teaching approach.
8. More systematic, orderly, and business-like in their classroom approach.
9. More stimulating and imaginative in their classrooms than their teaching colleagues.
10. Supportive of special education provisions for the gifted. (Bishop, 1975).

Some planners of teacher training programs might wish to follow the advice of James Gallagher and avoid one of the pitfalls resultant from characteristics of teachers for the gifted listings. His perusal of such listings generated the following traits:

1. Good health and physical superiority
2. Versatility of interests
3. Creativeness and originality
4. Unusual proficiency in teaching subjects
5. Participating member of the community
6. Clear and consistent philosophy of education
7. Knowledge of theories of learning
8. Excellent sense of humor
9. Abundant physical energy (Gallagher, 1975).

He warns that no human being may be able to live up to such a set of criteria or if he/she could, one such person would "be able to achieve a position at the highest executive or professional level of our society." (Gallagher, 1975).

While Gallagher's caution is well taken, such traits would seem to be most appropriate for a teacher of the gifted. Indeed, might not such a teacher represent the highest professional level in teaching?

The whole notion of competencies introduces yet another set of variables into the issue of "who shall become?" Whereas characteristics are generally considered as entrance criteria, wherever possible, competencies are most often perceived as program exit criteria. One representative listing suggests the following as skills and competencies that have been identified for teachers of the gifted.

1. Knowledge of nature and needs of gifted
2. Skill in utilizing tests and test data
3. Skill in utilizing group dynamics
4. Skill in counseling and guidance
5. Skill in developing lessons in creative thinking
6. Skill in utilizing strategies such as simulation
7. Skill in providing learning opportunities at all levels of cognition
8. Skill in relating the cognitive and affective dimensions
9. Knowledge of new developments in education
10. Knowledge of current research in gifted
11. Skill in demonstrating lessons for gifted
12. Skill in conducting action research (Sisk, 1976)

Perusal of these various listings of characteristics, skills, and competencies does seem to generate some consensus. It would appear that these items would provide some insights into the development of needed ingredients in teacher training models. This consensus is reported, along with a suggestion for its utilization, in the next section.

How Shall They Become?

This question should be reflected upon with considerable candor and caution. Educators, of which group this author is one, can well be accused of possessing an over abundance of program development zeal---rushing in where angels fear to tread. Some might feel that the day after someone strongly suggests that there

be a new curriculum on melting icebergs in Antarctica, a teacher-trainer would have a new, appropriate, teacher training model to train implementers for such a curriculum. Many times such models simply evidence more of the same---old wine in new bottles, or curricular overkill---surgery where an aspirin might do. It is in full cognizance of such concerns that the following thoughts and suggestions dealing with the "how to" are proposed.

As indicated earlier, there appeared to be some consensus that the teacher of the gifted should possess certain traits. Might this not suggest that a teacher training model should include a means for determining whether or not a prospective trainee evidences such traits as:

Maturity/security---mentally superior themselves---possess unusual proficiency in teaching subjects...desire to teach the gifted...not threatened by superior students

Creativity/flexibility...pursue avocational interests which are intellectual in nature---are comparatively more stimulating and imaginative...possess versatility of interests...evidence creativity and originality...are resourceful...are imaginative

Ability to individualize---are able to demonstrate that they are systematic, orderly, businesslike in classroom approach...are knowledgeable enough to have more than one appropriate means for teaching content and/or concepts

Experience...show evidence of teaching knowledge reflecting at least an implementation/application cognitive level rather than simply a knowledge level base...show evidence of effectiveness in the regular instructional setting

Gremlins...possess a quest for high achievement---really like students...are student centered...rationally advocate for students...show a willingness to instructionally release students to learn on their own

It seems reasonable to assume that no teacher training program, no matter how good it might be, is going to instill all of the preceding traits. Evidence of the existence of these traits will necessarily need to be present, at least to some high degree, at program entrance. The teacher training program should be designed to polish these traits while providing new, supportive knowledge and experience.

It would seem possible that these traits be assessed through some sort of structured interview. The interview might be designed to provide the feeling of a divergent questioning session while really seeking responses coupled to these traits. Another means could be letters of reference from past and/or present employers (school officials and colleagues). The initial letter(s), requesting the reference(s), might solicit statements descriptive of personality traits, teaching style, intellectual activity, appropriate experiences, with no greater specificity than that. In this way the respondent would not be overly cued to present information he/she thinks the entrance examiner wants to hear, whether such be truly reflective of the candidate or not.

When the candidate is admitted to a training program for teachers of the gifted, the aforementioned traits should be appraised throughout the duration of the program. The best entrance devices need to be checked for accuracy

while the candidate is in training. If they (the traits) were not really present upon program entrance, attempts to remediate the deficit(s) are appropriate. If an area of inaccuracy involving a significant number of trainees emerges, entrance assessment procedures will need to be reassessed and modified. At any rate, in-program assessment will call for strong teamwork among trainers in order to insure high levels of inter-judge reliability in trait detection.

The makeup of the teacher training program, itself should reflect some features of prescription and some of flexibility...some of pedagogy and some of content. Perhaps the real quest is to train the teacher of the gifted to become a true master teacher.

Prescriptive content/pedagogy would seem best to include such fundamental elements as:

The nature and needs of the gifted

Educational strategies for the gifted

Formal and informal student assessment

Evaluation techniques appropriate for use with various intervention strategies

Foundations (philosophy, psychology---) for further, not initial development

Trainees may need greater or lesser amounts of these elements dependent upon their individual background and needs. The program should be individually prescribed to accommodate such individual differences.

Flexible content/pedagogy should be geared to provide for at least one of two possible results. One situation involves a potential teacher of the gifted who possesses a fairly strong background in a given area. Such a trainee should be allowed and encouraged to develop this area even more during the training program. For example, a trainee with good mathematical background should increase this through advanced coursework in mathematics. This will result in a greater intellectual breadth which will further expand horizons applicable to working with and guiding gifted learner . The second case may involve the entrant who is more of a generalist. Such a person may fill the role of advocate for the gifted upon program completion. It might be well to direct the flexible content/pedagogy concept to provide attention to areas not yet explored in the entrant's past educational preparation. This would provide at least for a better than layman's knowledge in several fields, so that the emergent advocate could speak intelligently with potential mentors, resource persons, and community leaders. This should enhance such a trainee's ability for establishing programs and experiences for the gifted.

There should also exist some other options within a training program. A practicum experience might be one such option. Some existent programs do prescribe this. On the other extreme, based upon a concern for never being completely sure of the validity of such experience prescriptions for experienced teachers, there are programs without prescriptive practica. The state of the art/science of teaching does not strike all educators as being far enough along to be able to testify to successful practical applications after four, six, eight, sixteen weeks in a relatively unreal practice/experience setting. This may be fine for some and should be prescriptive for those neophytes, but, why not leave it optional for experienced entrants? Why not allow them to do their

own applications, adjustments, and generalizations if they so desire? Where there are instances necessitating evidence of proficiency, make it specific to the task; e.g., administering a given formal assessment instrument. Where evidence is of a general, more nebulous, nature provide access to the general practicum but, don't prescribe it for all.

Finally, the training program should include a capstone experience---a professional recital. Call this a research project, paper, thesis, whatever, some such should be included. Such an activity insures a high level, culminating experience of a research/discovery/enlightenment nature. It should also insure that the training program is not exiting professional illiterates. It may also provide the means for students and faculty to become partners in research, and make some of the discoveries necessary for the progress and promotion of education of the gifted in our society.

If we are finally going to provide the gifted the right to an appropriate education, which they would seem to deserve equally as much as the handicapped who have gained such a right through Public Law 94:142, should we not attempt to specially train master teachers to provide them such education? The position here stated would answer this question in the affirmative and hope that the training program ideas proposed would provide some notions as to how to nurture such teachers.

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